

RELIGION AND POLITICS: COMPARING MIDDLE EAST AND WESTERN CONTEXT

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Abstract: The examination of the separation between religion and state in both Western democracies and the Middle East utilizes five criteria from the Religion and State dataset: the official relationship between religion and government, the comparative handling of different faiths, discrimination against religious minorities, regulation of the dominant religion, and religious laws are key issues. The findings indicate that although these factors are more common in the Middle East, they are also present in some Western democracies. Furthermore, all Western democracies, except the U.S., exhibit at least some of these five forms of government entanglement with religion. This suggests that the U.S. is an exception among liberal democracies in terms of separating religion and state, and that religious democracy, including Islamic democracy, is feasible. The Middle East is the birthplace of the three major monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as well as several minor ones. The region's politics, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Iranian revolution and the rise of extremist groups like Al-Qaida, is often perceived by both insiders and outsiders as driven by religious conflict. Nonetheless, Middle Eastern politics has never been exclusively about religion, even when religious language and symbols are used. At its core, politics is about power, and political actors bring their own perspectives on the causes of injustice and the appropriate methods for political change. In the Middle East, many of these perspectives are explicitly religious; however, Western countries have also experienced a resurgence of political debate concerning religion, from its role in national politics to the increasing number of religious revivalist movements. In this sense, Middle Eastern politics is not necessarily more focused on religion than politics in Western countries. Additionally, the role of religion extends beyond the use of religious symbolism in political conflicts or the ways regimes and their challengers claim legitimacy through religious authority. Religion is also a fundamental part of daily life in every Middle Eastern country, shaping how most ordinary citizens perceive politics and their own place in the world.

Keywords: Political Society, Civil Society, Democracy, MENA Countries, Green Capital.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2011, revolutions swept through several Middle Eastern nations, yet the pivotal role of religion in politics remained unchanged. Despite the fact that the ousted governments in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, which were all rooted in military power, considered themselves secular, they still proclaimed their allegiance to Islam. The opposition groups that emerged to take control in Egypt and Tunisia criticized the former regimes for their antagonism towards Islamist factions and Islamic values, as well as their authoritarian nature. Across the region, post-revolution political debates focused on the role of religion within the state. Islamists endeavoured to demonstrate that their faith did not hinder their ability to govern effectively, while secularists criticized Islamists but maintained their own respect for all religious beliefs. This issue, previously simmering under the surface due to repression and censorship, became openly discussed and threatened to dominate the new political landscape in these three countries. Western leaders, who had previously tolerated the dictators they dealt with, were now concerned about their relationships with new regimes that were more religiously inclined than their predecessors. They feared that these new governments might revert to authoritarianism or adopt anti-Western stances, or both. Similar concerns complicated perspectives on the Syrian civil war, where a minority-led, sectarian regime backed by Shii Iran faced opposition from Sunni rebels, some of whom were Islamists.

Turkey's emergence as a democratic, Islamist model for these Arab nations provided reassurance to some and caused unease for others. Religion seems to consistently play a role in Middle Eastern politics, but this phenomenon is not unique to the region. It is rare to read about global current events without encountering references to the intersection of religion and politics. Throughout history, particularly in the Mediterranean area where Judaism, Christianity, and Islam originated, religion and politics have been intertwined. Only in the last two or three centuries have people begun to argue against the mingling of religion and politics, advocating for their complete separation. Both Western scholars of Middle Eastern studies (Orientalists) and proponents of modernization theory, like the German sociologist Max Weber, posited two contrasting possibilities: a "traditional," religiously based state and a modern, secular state. However, politics and religion have rarely been as completely merged as the "traditional" model suggests or as distinctly separate as modern secularists might prefer. Five centuries before the common era, Socrates urged his fellow citizens to think rationally about political issues, challenging the idea that the state should rely on the mysterious actions.

Five hundred years before the start of the common era, Socrates urged his fellow citizens to apply rational thought to political issues, challenging the idea that the state should rely on the mysterious actions and declarations of the gods for its understanding of justice. When accused of undermining the city's religion, he indirectly defended himself by asserting his belief in "divine" things, and thus in gods, but this defence did not prevent his conviction by a jury of his peers. Instead of fleeing from his death sentence, he chose to adhere to the laws of Athens, declaring that the state is "dearer than one's mother or father," as only within a state can one live under the law, and without law, a good life is unattainable. How could he be certain of these beliefs? His divine inspiration, the little demon, did not deter him from his path. Socrates opposed the city's traditional religion in favor of a belief in logic, which he saw as supported by divine inspiration.

2. HISTORY

About a millennium later, Muhammad appeared in Arabia with a new religious vision and the necessary political acumen to establish a state. For many Westerners and modern Islamists, Muhammad's achievements demonstrate the inherent unity of religion and politics in the Islamic tradition. In 20th-century Egypt, Islamists inspired by Sayyid Qutb sought to restore that unity by employing Muhammad's revolutionary methods to combat what he termed the new age of ignorance, a modern jahiliyya. Some Westerners, partly in response to Islamist claims, have argued that Islam inherently involves a politics of authoritarianism and aggression. However, Muhammad, even if he embodied a perfect blend of religion and politics, lived only ten years after the hijra (migration) from Mecca to Yathrib, later known as Medina, the city of the Prophet. From 632 onward, the nascent Islamic community faced the future without a prophet to lead it. The role of successor (caliph) was neither purely religious nor entirely political. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, instructed his fellow Muslims to follow him only as long as he remained true to God and the Prophet. "If I do well, help me, and if I do ill, correct me," he said, claiming no divine powers. The Islamic world has since grappled with balancing the religious and the political.

Half a millennium later, within a political framework that declared the separation of church and state, Martin Luther King Jr. grounded his civil rights movement in religious beliefs. Similar to Socrates and Sir Thomas More, he declared his commitment to absolute principles of truth and justice, which he saw as integral to the Christian faith. He urged fellow Christians to acknowledge the injustice of discriminatory laws, arguing that the political system was, in his view, based on Christian ideals of truth and justice.

All nations integrate religion and politics in some way. As Jean-Paul Willaime states, "Every set of political institutions is linked to a certain treatment of the religious fact."⁵ When well-organized, the religious sphere can pose a potential threat to the political realm by appealing to the nation's moral conscience. The political sphere, equipped with coercive and incentivizing powers, can make life challenging, if not impossible, for independent religious organizations, yet few states have succeeded in suppressing all religious expressions for extended periods. Political stability necessitates "an appropriate harmony between religion and politics."⁶ This harmony or balance might be defined as a state where neither the religious nor the political sphere seeks drastic changes in their relationship. This does not mean that the power of the two spheres is equal. The resources of a religious establishment and a political regime are too distinct to be compared

in terms of quantity or even quality. Balance merely indicates a temporary state where neither side is actively pursuing significant change. Settlement would imply maintaining a long-term balance in a particular country.

3. RELIGION & POLITICAL SOCIETY

Religion is increasingly breaking free from its traditional role of endorsing secular authority, as representatives of religious organizations are now more inclined to critique and challenge the state on various issues. Although this growing scrutiny of state policies might suggest a revival of religion's socio-political influence, further questions remain. The issues at hand are secular, and religious entities engaging in these areas represent a significant shift from focusing on the supernatural and devotional practices to pursuing largely secular objectives through secular methods. However, caution is warranted: when religious interests function as 'pressure groups' rather than 'prayer bodies,' their effectiveness is not guaranteed. As Wilson (1992: 202–3) points out, the more secularized a society becomes, the less likely it is for religious organizations to wield significant political influence. In the realm of political society, where political competition is organized to gain control over public power and the state apparatus, various religious responses can be observed, partly influenced by the level of secularization. These responses include (1) opposition to the separation of religious and secular spheres, a goal of many so-called religious 'fundamentalist' groups; (2) mobilizations and counter-mobilizations by religious groups and confessional political parties against other religions or secular movements and parties; and (3) religious organizations advocating for religious, social, and political freedoms, such as demanding the rule of law and Legal protection of human and civil rights, encouraging civil society engagement, and supporting democratically elected governments are crucial. Recently, such efforts have been seen in the Roman Catholic mobilization in Poland and Spain (Casanova 1994) and the activities of Islamic groups in various MENA countries, including Morocco and Turkey.

4. RELIGION & CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society serves as a platform where diverse social movements, such as neighbourhood associations, women's groups, religious organizations, and intellectual currents, come together with civic organizations like lawyers', journalists', trade unions', and entrepreneurs' associations. These groups form a network to express their views and pursue their shared interests. Unlike political society, civil society encompasses organizations and movements that are not political parties and are not directly involved in government operations or political management. However, this does not preclude civil society organizations from attempting to influence political matters, including democratic processes and national constitutions. In the context of religion within civil society, one can differentiate between dominant civil religions, such as Evangelical Protestantism in 19th-century America, and the recent public involvement of religious groups focused on specific issues like anti-abortion or broader moral perspectives on societal development, such as homosexual rights or appropriate shopping days. Religious entities may seek to influence public policy without aiming for political office by employing various strategies, including: (1) lobbying government officials; (2) pursuing legal action; (3) establishing connections with political parties; (4) forming alliances with similar groups, whether secular or from other religious traditions; (5) mobilizing supporters to lobby or protest; and (6) using mass media to shape public opinion. The key point is that religious actors can use multiple approaches to achieve their goals.

5. RELIGION & STATE

The interactions between the state and religious bodies are often referred to as 'church–state' relations. It is important to note that one challenge in examining modern church–state relations is that the concept of a church is somewhat narrow, rooted in an Anglo-American perspective relevant mainly to Christian traditions. This concept originates from British establishmentarianism, where one church is legally recognized as the sole established church. Thus, when considering church–state relations, one might assume a singular relationship between two distinct, separately institutionalized entities. In this implicit model, there is one state and one church, with clearly defined jurisdictional boundaries. Both separation and pluralism must be protected, as it is assumed that the leading church, like the state, will seek institutional dominance over competing religious organizations. Meanwhile, the state is expected to uphold individual rights, even though it is presumed to have a tendency to expand its power at the expense of citizens' personal freedoms. In summary,

the traditional notion of church–state relations is based on dominant Christian views that the power of the state must be limited by societal forces, including religion.

The conventional European-centred Christian view holds that both church and state possess a significant degree of power relative to each other. However, examining the situation in Central and Eastern European countries under communist rule from shortly after World War II until the early 1990s reveals a different scenario. In these regions, states driven by communist ideology maintained and strictly enforced a unified system, characterized by the merging of political-administrative and religio-ideological structures. In contrast, in Western Europe, many countries have experienced a gradual reduction in the influence of Christian churches in the region. For instance, in France, the Catholic Church, which was demographically dominant, found itself on the wrong side of the ideological divide following the French Revolution, leading to a significant loss of power, privilege, and moral authority. By the mid-20th century, the church in France had considerably diminished political influence and societal relevance (Martin 1978: 16). The overarching point is that in modern Europe, the state holds more sway than the church, and while church–state issues still hold some political significance, their importance is generally waning as secularization progresses.

Extending the issue of church–state relations to non-Christian contexts requires some initial conceptual clarifications, particularly because the very notion of a prevailing state–church dichotomy is culturally specific. As previously mentioned, the church is a Christian institution, while the modern concept of the state is deeply embedded in the post-Reformation European political experience.

The main point is that there is a prevalent tension between secular power and religious organizations in today's world. In both Europe and the MENA region, religious groups, regardless of their faith, often strive to prevent the state from marginalizing them. They attempt this by reversing the trend of religious privatization, which affects various political and social issues.

In Europe, two trends are occurring simultaneously. Firstly, there is an observed rise in different forms of spirituality and religiosity, which also suggests a fragmentation and diminishing influence of previously dominant churches across the continent (Davie 2000). This rise is primarily seen in various 'new' religious and spiritual movements, such as 'New Age' spirituality, 'foreign' and 'exotic' Eastern religions like Hare Krishna, 'televangelism,' renewed interest in astrology, and 'new' sects like the Scientologists. However, as Casanova (1994: 5) notes, these religious groups are 'not particularly relevant for the social sciences or for the self-understanding of modernity,' as they do not pose 'major problems of interpretation ... They fit within expectations and can be interpreted within the framework of established theories of secularization.' Essentially, they are normal phenomena, examples of private religion that do not individually or collectively challenge existing societal structures, including political and social frameworks. These religious movements are apolitical, merely indicating that many people are interested in spiritual matters, sometimes in new forms. Additionally, in many European Catholic countries, such as Italy, Poland, and Spain, the Catholic Church is losing its moral influence, particularly among the youth (Hooper 1996; also see the chapters by Ceccarini and Hennig in this collection). In summary, the diversity of existing religious phenomena in Europe contradicts the notion of an inevitable, widespread decline in interest in religious meaning, even in seemingly highly secular nations. Moreover, innovative religious forms seem to be gaining popularity, often at the expense of traditional religions. However, from a political standpoint, new religions are not significant.

Three key questions are crucial in understanding the current political influence of religion.

Firstly, what motivates religious organizations to pursue political objectives? Contributors to this book argue that this happens when religious groups perceive a need for change and believe that the state is ill-equipped to manage and direct these changes, particularly because the state's solutions are secular and do not align with religious perspectives.

Secondly, how prevalent is this phenomenon? We begin with the assumption that it is widespread, although the subsequent chapters reveal that its implications are not consistent.

Thirdly, what are the political outcomes of religion's involvement? The brief answer is that they vary, as illustrated in the following chapters. For instance, religion sometimes plays a crucial role in political developments, such as the influence of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland during the democratization of the 1980s. However, as Hennig's chapter on Poland and Ceccarini's on Italy demonstrate, this influence can diminish over time. In other contexts, as

Cavatorta discusses regarding Islamists in Morocco, Ozel on Islamic movements in Turkey, and Ben-Porat on Jewish fundamentalists in Israel, the outcomes can be unpredictable and diverse, occasionally manifesting at the level of 'sub-politics'.

6. DEMOCRACY

There are numerous instances of religion's recent significant impact on democratic processes. For example, the Roman Catholic Church played a leading role in the 'third wave of democracy' from the mid-1970s to the late 1990s, significantly affecting politics in Southern and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Concurrently, the rise of the Christian Right in the United States had a substantial impact on the electoral prospects of both the Republican and Democratic Parties. Additionally, the widespread growth of Islamist movements across the Muslim world has had notable effects on electoral outcomes in countries like Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco. The electoral successes of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India and the considerable political influence of various 'Jewish fundamentalist' parties in Israel further demonstrate religion's recent importance in democratic contexts. Ozel explores the emergence of political Islam in Turkey, which took place during the country's post-1983 democratization. She focuses on a related phenomenon in Turkey that has received relatively little academic attention: the connections between political Islam, 'Islamic economics,' and transnational Islamist business networks. She explains that transnational networks often represent the process of globalization and its pervasive forces, which create sometimes surprising connections across a wide range of actors and domains. Religion-based networks are no exception to this overarching trend.

She starts by emphasizing the transformation of what she terms homo Islamic within the sphere of Islamic economics, which embodies an ideational legitimacy aligned with prevailing neoliberal discourses. Conversely, Islamic finance institutions support the operations of Islamic economics by providing legitimate tools that align with Islam's principles against interest. Her research centres on Islamic business in Turkey and its connections to the recent rise of political Islam. By exploring both transnational and national Islamic business networks, the growth of Islamic finance, and ideational elements like the so-called 'quiet Islamic Reformation' or 'Islamic Calvinism' reportedly occurring in Turkey, her chapter offers valuable insights into the recent resurgence of entrepreneurship, often attributed to 'green capital' and the so-called 'Islamic Calvinism'.

7. CONCLUSION

The equilibrium between the two spheres relies on the willingness of key players, but it also hinges on the social context in which these actors operate. Social change impacts the two spheres differently. For instance, increasing literacy rates enhance the public's ability to read scriptures and political propaganda, including that of religious groups. Believers who study religion in both church and school, and who learn about religions other than their own, begin to view religion as a choice rather than a given, as an entity with specific characteristics that set it apart from other religions. Educated believers pave the way for change in the religious sphere; they enable, but do not necessarily compel, religious elites to make new kinds of appeals to followers and demands on them and the state. The political sphere, still reliant on traditional elites, may find these demands objectionable, even though by promoting education, it may have initiated a transformation in the nature of religious activity. By advancing education and other welfare activities, the religious sphere may itself be able to alter society in ways that challenge the power of dominant elites. Therefore, any balance between the religious and political spheres depends on a particular set of environmental conditions over which each sphere has limited control. A relatively impoverished, isolated community governed by elites nominally accountable to an external power may achieve balance due to its distance from the forces of modernization and globalization. If that community becomes integrated into a larger one, or if local forces take full control, or if the external power introduces schools and teachers, stability may give way to instability in the relationship between religion and politics. To drive social change, the state may seek to increase its independence from "traditionalizing forces," such as religion, and the balance may shift away from the religious. At other times, the religious sphere may become assertive in its efforts to restore the balance and limit the ability of political elites to act without religious backing.

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